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ABSTRACT

The role of Christian day schools in meeting changing educational and social needs is evaluated and educational trends since the 1960s are reviewed. Among the solutions proposed to remedy alleged educational ills of the 1960s (including that schools were simultaneously too liberal, racist, permissive, authoritarian, and irrelevant) were free schools, curriculum reform, changes in school government, and interdenominational schools. Among these alternatives, Christian day schools have become the fastest growing segment of formal education. Estimates indicate that there are between five and six thousand recently established Christian schools in the United States serving approximately 950,000 students. Reasons for the proliferation of Christian schools include disenchantment among Protestants regarding public schooling, alienation among evangelical Protestants from the American social order, and a desire for schools which stress discipline, are based on a conservative Christian perspective, and recognize the scriptures as the final authority for value judgments. Many questions relating to the quality and nature of the education provided by Christian day schools must be answered before the schools can be properly assessed. These questions include: How will graduates of Christian schools fare in society?; To what extent will Christian schools be standardized with regard to academic and enrollment procedures?; and Will evangelical Protestants be able to afford both public and parochial schools? (DB)

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AN EMERGING ALTERNATIVE TO PUBLIC EDUCATION: THE CHRISTIAN DAY SCHOOL

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THE CHRISTIAN DAY SCHOOL

The American social order has recently emerged from a period of unprecedented upheaval, agonizing self-appraisal, and change. From the early 1960s until the mid-1970s American institutions and the values, traditions, and purposes undergirding them were subjected to poignant criticism and often scorn. Although it is too early to assess accurately the total impact of these years of profound disenchantment, it is apparent that they witnessed a collapse of consensus concerning the basic nature and function of our institutions, an erosion of American civil religion. As the sense of national cohesiveness evanesced, alternative modes of thinking, believing, and acting appeared. Some were new while others were merely old options revivified.[1] These phenomena, exemplified by, among other things, the apotheosis of self, a decline of belief in all forms of obligation, the rejection of the past, and confusion about the meaning of progress, morality, authority, justice, responsibility, and civility, suggest a "watershed" in American history. As the noted American historian Henry Steele Commager has observed, "Perhaps the 60s and the 70s are a great divide--the divide of disillusionment."[2]

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This disillusionment and collapse of consensus was reflected clearly in Americans' dissatisfaction with public education. While schooling has been the object of much acrimonious discussion since its inception, never before has the criticism been so mordant. The lay public and commentators of all socio-political persuasions scrutinized the schools and found them wanting. Charges leveled at public education were legion and, indicative of the fragmented nature of the society, often contradictory. Schooling was simultaneously characterized as racist, permissive, authoritarian, trendy, irrelevant, too conservative, too liberal, an instrument for maintaining the status quo, too involved in social change, and generally unresponsive.[3]

Solutions to the school crisis were many and varied. Some observers proposed reforms of the curriculum, while others advocated changes in school governance patterns, teacher education, and methods of school finance. Several commentators eschewed reform altogether and argued for the abolition of schools.

Of all the proposed remedies, one of the most heralded was the free school movement which emanated originally from the socio-political left. Dedicated to a more "humane" and "liberating" education and opposed to standardization and regimentation, several hundred of these institutions were established outside the public school system in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Variations of the free school concept were eventually incorporated within the public

system. While much has been written about the successes and failures of the free school and related alternative education schemes, one has received little scholarly attention.[4]

The alternative is the Christian day school. Since the mid-1960s evangelical Protestants have been establishing interdenominational Christian schools at a phenomenal rate.[5] Not only do these schools constitute the fastest growing segment of formal education in America today, but they also represent the first widespread secession from the public school pattern since the establishment of Catholic schools in the nineteenth century.

Protestant-sponsored weekday education is not a contemporary phenomenon. Since the nineteenth century most denominations have experimented with parochial schooling. The vast majority of Protestants, however, have shown scant interest in such an educational arrangement. Only certain Lutheran bodies, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Christian Reformed Church have sponsored a significant number of weekday schools.[6]

Most Protestants have supported public schooling since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. Early public education enjoyed their approval because it reflected the Protestant values of the society and was viewed as an integral part of the Protestant crusade to establish a Christian America. According to church historian Robert T. Handy, elementary schools did not need to be under the control

of particular denominations because "their role was to prepare young Americans for participation in the broadly Christian civilization toward which all evangelicals were working."[7] While the public school via Bible reading, prayers, and the ubiquitous McGuffey readers emphasized nondenominational evangelical Protestantism, the American civil faith for the better part of nineteenth century, the Sunday School stressed the particular teachings of the various denominations. To most evangelical Protestants this "parallel institutions" educational strategy was quite satisfactory. As William B. Kennedy, an authority on Protestant education, has argued:

> By 1860 there had emerged a general consensus in American Protestantism that the combination of public and Sunday school teaching would largely take care of the needed religious teaching of the young. In that pattern the public school was primary; the Sunday school was adjunct to it, providing specific religious teaching it could not include.[8]

Much has changed in America since the establishment of this dualistic educational strategy. No longer does evangelical Protestantism influence the society and the schools as it did in the nineteenth century. The past six decades have witnessed its rapid decline as the moving force behind cultural and behavioral patterns and its eventual demise in the 1960s. Despite this radical alteration of the American scene, most Protestants have clung to the myth of the "parallel institutions" educational arrangement. The rapid expansion of Christian day schools during the past fifteen years suggests, however, that a growing number of

evangelicals are not only wrestling with the impact of the collapse of Protestantism as a social foundation but also questioning their long standing commitment to public schooling and the dualistic strategy of education.

Just what is a Christian day school? The term has been used recently to describe those schools, many of which are interdenominational, founded in the past decade and a half by evangelical Protestants. In numerous ways these institutions are quite diverse. Facilities, for example, range from poorly equipped church basements to modern multi-building campuses. Enrollments vary from less than fifty to over two thousand. The atmosphere in these schools runs the gamut from exacting discipline and dress codes to moderate regulation of student life. Curricular offerings range from the most rudimentary to the most comprehensive available anywhere. Some mix healthy doses of pre-1960 "Americanism" with religious belief while others shun this unfortunate practice. Some Christian day schools are attended by whites only, sometimes, regretably, because of segregative intent, while many are integrated. A militant rejection of any state regulation characterizes some schools while others cooperate to varying degrees with state education agencies.[9]

Although these institutions are diverse in many respects, they all profess the centrality of Jesus Christ and the Bible in their educational endeavors. Regardless of the subject matter, a conservative Christian perspective

is employed. For example, history is generally viewed as the record of God's involvement in human affairs and science is perceived as the outworking of His laws. Moral education, an important aspect of the instructional program, is also biblically based. Students are instructed to search the Scriptures as the final authority for value judgments. Summing up the difference between the ethos of the Christian school and that of the public school, Paul A. Kienel, Executive Director of the newly formed Association of Christian Schools International, has observed:

> ...Christian schools are Christian institutions where Jesus Christ and the Bible are central in the school curriculum and in the lives of the teachers and administrators. This distinction removes us from direct competition with public schools. Although we often compare ourselves academically, we are educational institutions operating on separate philosophical tracks. Ours is Christ-centered education, presented in the Christian context. Theirs is man-centered education presented within the context of the supremacy of man as opposed to the supremacy of God. Their position is known as secular humanism.[10]

How rapidly are Christian day schools multiplying? "There's a grass-roots explosion taking place among church-related schools in the United States," according to Thomas W. Klewin, an observer of the Christian day school movement. "It's happening, strangely, not among the traditional parochial-school systems, but in the interdenominational, multicongregational Christian schools of the evangelical Protestants."[11] Some have estimated that such schools are being established at the rate of almost two a day.[12] While there is no doubt that these schools have burgeoned recently,

particularly since 1967, it is difficult to assess their number and student population precisely. The very character of the Christian day school movement prohibits an accurate accounting. Many schools are of such a separatist persuasion that they refuse to report enrollment and related figures to state and federal education agencies. For similar reasons some schools do not join one of the approximately fifty state and regional associations of Christian schools which are currently the primary sources of data. Also, the rapid growth of these schools is so unorganized that accurate figures are difficult to obtain.

Illustrative of these problems is the variation in estimates of the number of Christian day schools and their enrollment. Calculations of the number of these schools founded since the early 1960s range from 4,000 to as many as 10,000. Enrollment figures for these schools range from 250,000 to over 1,200,000. Based on the best available data, an estimate of between 5,000 and 6,000 recently established schools with a student population of approximately 950,000 seems reasonable.[13]

Perhaps the most concrete evidence of the "boom" in Christian day schools can be seen in the figures of several associations. For example, the Western Association of Christian Schools, which merged recently with two other groups to form the Association of Christian Schools International, claimed 102 schools with an enrollment of 14,659 in 1967. By 1972 the figures were 246 and 34,949 respectively,

and in 1978, 763 and 93,576. The American Association of Christian Schools was founded in 1972 with eighty schools enrolling 16,000 students. In 1978 the association boasted better than 800 schools with a student population in excess of 100,000.[14] Despite the fact that a few schools probably hold dual memberships and some were founded long before they affiliated, these figures indicate the phenomenal growth of a movement which shows no sign of abating.

Why are these schools proliferating? Why are many Protestants forsaking their traditional commitment to public schooling and the "parallel institutions" educational strategy? There are a number of reasons involved. Some are symbolic of evangelical Protestants' growing alienation from the American social order. To many of them the public school exemplifies the trends they deplore in society, such as the decline of authority, lapse of standards, rejection of the Judeo-Christian value system, loosening of custom and constraint, scientism, sexual permissiveness, government social engineering, and hedonism. Thus when they establish schools which stress the Bible, moral absolutes, basic subject matter mastery, academic standards, discipline, and hard work, they are not only protesting the secular nature of public education, unsatisfactory academic and behavioral standards, and unrest in the schools but also expressing disillusionment with the society that sustains the educational enterprise.

While many evangelicals have pointed to discipline problems, declining educational standards, federal meddling,

the drug culture, race-related problems, and unresponsive educators as reasons for abandoning the public schools, secularism has disturbed them the most.[15] Although the United States Supreme Court decisions in 1962 and 1963 outlawing mandatory prayer and devotional Bible reading in tax supported schools merely marked the culmination of better than a half-century long process of "de-Protestantization" of public education, many evangelical Protestants translated the removal of these symbols as yanking God out of the schools.[16] Rather than making the schools neutral on matters related to religion, many believed that, despite the intent of the majority of the Court, these decisions were a victory for secular humanism. Such a belief sensitized them to what was being taught in the schools. So while these decisions did not cause directly the rapid growth of Christian day schools, they certainly provoked many Protestants to scrutinize the public schools as never before. The result of such scrutiny was often disillusionment with the secular character of the schools and, in many cases, consequent founding of Christian educational institutions. As Richard N. Ostling, a staff writer for the religion section of Time, has observed, "there is little doubt that the rulings produced anxiety about the climate in public schools that is boosting Protestant schools many years later."[17]

Evidence of this anxiety can be seen in the curriculum controversies of the past decade in, among other places,

West Virginia, New Jersey, California, Virginia, Minnesota, and Texas where evangelical Protestants have complained about the secular humanistic slant of the schools. Examples of what is perceived as bias abound. For instance, many have protested the well-known elementary social studies curriculum Man: A Course of Study. In this course they see moral absolutes undermined in favor of situation ethics. Likewise, science textbooks which proclaim evolution as dogma offend those who believe creationism should be considered as well. Many evangelicals also see evidence of secular humanism in values clarification programs which assume there are no absolutes. Behavioral sciences texts which imply that man is an animal rather than a being created in the image of God, belittle the belief in an omniscient creator, and equate the Bible with myth also trouble them.[18] Floyd Robertson of the National Association of Evangelicals summed up the thinking of many of his fellow believers concerning the charactor of public education when he wrote: "It has become quite obvious to many that this religion of secularism has indeed pervaded our public school system and created an anti-Christian attitude in all too many cases."[19] Although a majority of evangelical Protestants still enroll their children in the public system and continue to wrestle with its secular character, an increasing number are opting for Christian day schools. Like nineteenth century Catholics who established parochial schools to preserve their religion and culture, a significant number of evangelicals are

founding schools to counter the secular influence of society and its institutions on their children.

Awakening and profession as well as alienation and protest are involved in the growth of these schools. The movement is more than just a "counter-cultural" phenomenon. A recrudescent evangelical consciousness, one manifestation of the spiritual ferment of the past fifteen years, has prompted many to promote Christian education beyond the home and the marginally effective efforts of the Sunday School.[20] Realizing that all education is value oriented and Christian nurture is a full-time endeavor, they have founded schools that profess the biblical beliefs of the church and home. As one parent affirmed on a Christian school application form, "We believe that our children are gifts of the Lord. We are responsible as parents to train them according to His Word not only at home and in church, but in school as well."[21] By enthusiastically establishing schools to complement the home and church, a significant number of evangelical Protestants believe they have fashioned an "educational configuration" in which all components are engaged in their conception of the scriptural command to "train up a child in the way he should go...."[22]

Zeal for Christian day schools is not universal. Some have argued that such schools represent an abdication of Christian social responsibility rather than a Christian witness as their proponents proclaim. They believe that Christians have a moral obligation to support public education

rather than private schools. To them the public school is a mission field to be cultivated, not abandoned. William H. Willimon of Duke Divinity School enunciated this position in an article which raised the perennially controverted question of how to be in the world but not of it:

> In too many communities, parents who are talented, educated, committed Christians have withdrawn their children (along with their time, talent, and prayers) from the public schools without a thought for their responsibility as their brother's keeper. Without children in the public schools, they have little interest in the needs of public education.... Certainly there is much wrong in today's public schools--mostly the same things that are wrong with our society as a whole. Christian parents have good reason to feel alarmed over many recent developments in public education. But who will improve it? What kind of society will we have if all Christians abandon the public schools?[23]

Others have charged that many so-called Christian schools were established to maintain racial segregation. A recent study by David Nevin and Robert E. Bills suggests, regretably, that racism was an important factor in the founding of many schools in the South which purport to be "Christian." This is by no means true of all Christian schools in the region since many of them enroll minority students.[24] In other areas of the country busing has played a role in the creation of some schools. Often it was the "straw that broke the camel's back." But it is unclear as to whether the reaction to busing was because of racism, or resentment of federal coercion, or fear of unrest, or a combination of all three.[25]

Although racism has, unfortunately, been a factor in the founding and maintenance of some of these schools,

the vast majority of Christian schools eschew racial exclusion. Most Christian school associations and spokesmen for the movement condemn racially motivated schooling. In the words of D. Bruce Lockerbie, a respected Christian educator, "The Racist Stronghold claiming also to be a 'Christian school' is, by definition, an imposter, a fraud. Its reason for being is indefensible by standards of Scripture, the Constitution,... common decency."[26] Besides professing nondiscrimination, it appears that an increasing number of Christian schools, in fact, are enrolling minority students.

Questions have also been raised by proponents as well as opponents of Christian day schools relative to the quality and nature of the education provided by these schools. Several observers have lamented the poor academic quality of some schools. Critics have rightly deplored the "super-patriotism" which characterizes a number of Christian schools. Commentators have also suggested that perhaps these schools shelter students and therefore fail to prepare them for life in the "real world."[27]

In 1967 Henry A. Buchanan and Bob W. Brown co-authored an article in Christianity Today entitled, "Will Protestant Church Schools Become a Third Force?". They answered their query in the affirmative.[28] While Christian day schools have yet to attain the stature of either the Roman Catholic school system or the public educational enterprise, they are becoming increasingly visible on the educational landscape and offer many opportunities for research.

Whether or not they will become a "third force" depends not only on the resolution of some of the aforementioned problems but also on answers to a number of questions. For example, how will these schools relate to state and federal regulatory agencies whose actions have at times bordered on harassment? Four state court cases already have been argued on this touchy question where free exercise of religion collides with state interests.[29] Will evangelical Protestants be able to afford to support both public schools and parochial schools? How will graduates of Christian schools fare in society? To what extent will they "systematize" their schools? To what extent will the public school establishment attempt to accommodate disgruntled evangelicals? Will proponents of Christian schools accept the discredited assumption that schooling is a panacea for all problems? What direction will the apparent evangelical "awakening" take in the next decade?

The future of the Christian day school will be determined by answers to these and related questions. Regardless of its future as a possible "third force," it now stands as a viable alternative to the public school system, as evidence of evangelical Protestant reconsideration of educational strategy, a symbol of profession as well as protest, an attempt on the part of a significant number of parents to regain authority over those with whom they share the task of raising their children, and an indication of the crisis in American civil religion and one of the main vehicles of its transmission, the public school.

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[2]"In Quest of Leadership," Time, 15 July 1974, p. 23.

[3]For example, see Carl Bereiter, Must We Educate? (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Harry S. Broudy, The Real World of the Public Schools (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972); R. Freeman Butts, "Assaults on a Great Idea," The Nation, 30 April 1973, pp. 553-60; Ronald and Beatrice Gross, eds., Radical School Reform (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969); Allan C. Ornstein, "Critics and Criticism of Education," Educational Forum 42 (November 1977): 21-30; Peter Witonski, What Went Wrong With American Education and How to Make It Right (New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House, 1973).

[4]Lawrence A. Cremin, "The Free School Movement: A Perspective," Notes on Education 2 (October 1973): 1-11; Mario Fantini, ed., Alternative Education (Garden City, N. J.: Anchor Books, 1976); Allen Graubard, "The Free School Movement," Harvard Educational Review 42 (August 1972): 351-73; David Thornton Moore, "Social Order in an Alternative School," Teachers College Record 79 (February 1978): 437-60.

[5]Evangelical Protestantism is composed of several ideological subgroups. Richard Quebedeaux has identified four. Ranging from the most conservative to the least conservative on theological and social issues, they are "Separatist Fundamentalism," "Open Fundamentalism," "Establishment Evangelicalism," and "The New Evangelicalism." Although no research has been done on the matter, one would speculate that enthusiasm for Christian schools is greater in the "fundamentalist wing" than in the "evangelical wing." Richard Quebedeaux, The Young Evangelicals (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

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[10]Paul A. Kienel, "The Forces Behind The Christian School Movement," Christian School Comment 8 (n. d.): 1.

[11]Thomas W. Klewin, "Make Way for the Christian School," Liberty, September-October 1975, p. 18.

[12]Lanouette, "The Fourth R Is Religion," p. 1.

[13]Ayres, "Private Schools Provoking Church-State Conflict," p. A23; Lanouette, "The Fourth R is Religion," p. 1; Dave Raney, "Public School vs. Christian School," Moody Monthly, September 1978, p. 42; Towns, "Have the Public Schools Had It?," pp. 18-19.

[14]Gerald B. Carlson, American Association of Christian Schools, personal letter; Paul A. Kienel, Western Association of Christian Schools, personal letter. See also Paul A. Kienel, "Status of American Christian Schools," National Institute of Christian School Administration, Winona Lake, Ind., 25-30 July 1976.

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[16]Engle v. Vitale, 370 U. S. 421 (1962); Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U. S. 203 (1963); Murray v. Curlett, 374 U. S. 203 (1963).

[17]Ostling, "Why Protestant Schools Are Booming," p. 45.

[18]James C. Hefley, Textbooks on Trial (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1976); George Hillocks, Jr., "Books and Bombs: Ideological Conflict and the Schools--a Case Study of the Kanawha County Book Protest," School Review 86 (August 1978): 632-54; Dorothy Nelkin, Science Textbook Controversies and the Politics of Equal Time (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977); Ostling, "Why Protestant Schools Are Booming," p. 45; Gerald J. Stiles and Louis R. Rittweger, "The Dichotomy Between Pluralistic Rhetoric and Bias Practices," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, Philadelphia, Penn., 3 November 1977.

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[28]Henry A. Buchanan and Bob W. Brown, "Will Protestant Church Schools Become a Third Force?," Christianity Today, 12 May 1967, pp. 3-5.

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